

The Poetic Forms of Shakespeare's Three Single-Sentenced Sonnets

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Abstract With a New Formalist critical approach, this paper attempts to explore the poetic forms of the three single-sentenced sonnets (12, 15 and 29) by William Shakespeare, focusing on their poetic diction, artistic skills of figurative language, and unique syntactical and structural patterns. In examining the poetic language or verbal characteristics of the three sonnets, the paper will emphasize the importance of the poetic forms that are sidestepped by other critical interpretations. The poetic forms are important because they not only display unique artistic skills and create distinctive poetic effects but also possess signifying power, pointing to main ideas of the poems. Thus the paper argues that the poetic forms of the three sonnets are not only important organic parts of the poems but also help form and develop their complicated meanings. The paper first investigates Sonnets 12 and 15 by closely comparing some similar poetic diction in both poems, as it illustrates not only “the best words in their best order,” but is also loaded with crucial signifiers of the important themes, such as to preserve youth and beauty through procreation and eternal verse. Then, the paper will carefully compare and contrast Sonnets 12, 15 and 29, focusing on their syntactical and structural patterns, as all the three sonnets contain interesting similarities and striking differences in terms of grammar, syntax, structure and meanings. Moreover out of all Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, these three are commonly accepted by modern editors as the only ones written in just one single sentence.¹ Through analyzing the unique poetic forms of the three sonnets, we can clearly see how Shakespeare skillfully unifies the artistic poetic forms with important themes.

Key words Shakespeare's single-sentenced sonnets; comparison; syntax; poetic skills

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Introduction

"While the general aim of formalism, old and new, has always been to liberate textual meanings — and kinds of meaning — unavailable to non-formalist strategies of interpretation, a strong secondary aim of contemporary formalism is indeed to insist on the linguistic dimension of works of verbal art" (Bogel 4).

Different from all the traditionally thematic, historical and biographical approaches, this paper attempts to demonstrate how the artistic poetic forms of Sonnets 12, 15 and 29 greatly form the colorful threads which have weaved the three sonnets into artistic and beautiful tapestries — great works of art. More specifically, by emphasizing "the linguistic dimension of works of verbal art," this paper first explores the poetic diction of Sonnets 12 and 15, and shows how artistically it forms the syntactic patterns of the poems, which help develop their important meanings. Then the paper will compare and contrast the sequential, syntactic and structural patterns of Sonnets 12, 15 and 29, as all the three sonnets contain interesting similarities and striking differences in terms of grammar, syntax, structure, figurative language and poetic images. The paper lays stress on the poetic forms because "a poem is first and foremost a linguistic object, a piece of language, a structure whose 'material cause,' in Aristotelian terms, is the language in which it is written" (Bogel 29).

Many critics have recognized that Shakespeare's sonnets 12 and 15 are "the great ones" (Smith 9), no critics so far have systematically studied and examined the specific ingredients that have made them artistically great and beautiful. Everyone knows that Shakespeare is a great poet, but not everyone can convincingly tell how he is great. Thus this paper attempts to demonstrate how Shakespeare is indeed a great poet by systematically examining the colorful threads, namely the skillful poetic forms which have weaved Sonnets 12, 15 and 29 into artistic and beautiful tapestries — great works of art.

While exploring the artistic and aesthetic values of the poetic forms by applying some critical concepts of New Formalism by Fredric V. Bogel, the paper also attempts to study the intrinsic connections between the poetic forms with the themes of the poems according to some critical concepts of New Criticism by Cleanth Brook who claims: "A good poem is an object in which form and content can be distinguished but cannot really be separated" (367-8). Thus in this study

of the three sonnets by Shakespeare, some important concepts of New Formalism are applied to frame the discussion, but the paper also tries to achieve its goal by complementing the theoretical framework with other kinds of criticism that can strengthen its argument. For example, the paper also tries to supplement its critical framework with some New Critical concepts simply because New Formalism has derived and developed not only from Old Formalism but also from New Criticism at least partly. Thus both New Formalism and New Criticism are sometimes compatible and supplement each other although the former places more emphasis on forms while the latter emphasizes the organic unity of forms and contents of a poem. Thus Bogel further claims: "The importance of critical evaluation, the fiction of an ideal reader, the notion of a true reading, and the distinction between meanings and uses are intimately linked in ways that can point toward a revision of certain New Critical assumptions so as to make them compatible with New Formalist criticism and theory" (69). In other words, New Formalism closely pays "scrupulous attention to form" (Bogel 7), which is the part that can generate meaning for the whole while New Criticism is more interested in the harmonious union between the "parts" and the "whole."

Yet both New Formalism and New Criticism lay stress on close reading, as Bogel claims: "Close reading, that is to say, is not simply the marshaling of verbal evidence; it's what allows us to pass beyond superficial acquaintance, paraphrase, a fixation on theme, content, and semantic import in order to discover dimensions of meaning that inflect, complicate, exceed, perhaps even contradict what attention to content tells us" (22); at the same time Bogel also points out: "While most of these modes of analysis employ techniques of close reading, however, it was Anglo-American New Criticism that focused most intently on the language and meaning of texts understood as formally unified wholes, complex organizations of meaning" (8). For the same token, Ann B. Dobie also says: "The New Criticism went on to develop a sense of the importance of form (leading at some point to its being called formalism), their practice of the close reading of texts, and an appreciation of order" (33). Hence the close reading theories by both New Formalism and New Criticism serve my purpose well because mine is a close reading of the poetic forms of Shakespeare's Sonnets 12, 15 and 29.

Poetic Diction — Choices of the Best Words

"In seeking to discover that human content, formalist critics attend to virtually all features of language: semantics, grammar and syntax, figures of speech, diction and vocabulary, etymology, aural and visual patterns. They also identify literary forms

— not simply to classify them, or from faith in their a priori valence, but to disclose the signifying power of form in the individual instance” (Bogel 8).

In *The Poetry of William Shakespeare*, George Wyndham points out: “Apart from all else, it is the sheer beauty of diction in Shakespeare’s Sonnets which has endeared them to poets” (146). The beauty of Shakespeare’s diction in his sonnets has not only won admiration from poets, but also fascinated scholars and enchanted readers. The unique poetic diction in both Sonnets 12 and 15 can show some good examples to prove the point. In Shakespeare’s sonnets in general and Sonnets 12 and 15 in particular “the words are born or reborn in the act of thinking,”² and they clearly demonstrate that Shakespeare is indeed an outstanding master who can naturally put “the best words in their best order” in his poetic creation, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge terms it.³ The poetic dictions of “time,” “brave,” “day” and “night” in both Sonnets 12 and 15, and “increase,” “decease” and “decrease” in Sonnets 1 and 15 can convincingly illustrate the point, as they not only help enhance the poetic effects, and strengthen the syntactic patterns of the poems, but also convey the important unifying themes of preserving youth and beauty first by propagation and then by immortal verse in his sonnet sequence.

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls, all silver’d o’er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

As Gerald Hammond points out, reading Shakespeare’s sonnets, “the reader must inevitably be bound up with perplexing juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete” (7). In Sonnet 12, the first “perplexing juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete” is perhaps implied in the word “time” which appears three times: the first

time, “When I do count the clock that tells the time” (12:1), the second time, “That thou among the wastes of time must go” (12:10), and the third time, “And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence” (12:13). Obviously Shakespeare starts with the concrete meaning of “time” and gradually reveals its invisible destructive force in the poem and finally turns it into a metaphorical shadow of death shown in the Grim Reaper. The “time” indicated in line one is obviously concrete not only because it can be counted as seconds, minutes and hours by “the clock,” but also because it is poetically echoed in the clock’s onomatopoeic tick-tock rhythms implied in the ten monosyllabic words that form the iambic pentameter line. It is interesting enough to note that Sonnet 12 starts with a line of ten monosyllabic words, and is also wrapped up with a line of ten monosyllabic words at the end. In other words, all the words in both the first and last lines are simply single syllables and no other lines in between have the exact same feature. If the first line demonstrates the concrete meaning of time as seconds, minutes and hours, the last line displays the abstract connotation of “Time” as the dark shadow of the symbolic Grim Reaper, cutting everything alive. No one can avoid the scary cutting of his big scythe, and the rhythms of the clock / scythe can never be stopped except only by one thing: “Save breed.” Thus Shakespeare effectively and emphatically forces the idea of interrupting the rhythmic flowing progression of time with the only caesura used in the entire poem.⁴

Although the last line also reflects the first line with exactly ten monosyllabic words that symbolically mark the tick-tock rhythms of time’s forever progressing movement, unlike the first line starting with a standard smooth iambic pentameter, the last line begins with a heavy spondee that immediately follows the caesura, “Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence” and the caesura powerfully checks and stops the cutting of “Time’s scythe” in a metaphorical sense, or it strongly bridles “Time’s winged chariot” (to borrow Marvell’s poetic allusion from his “To His Coy Mistress”) just for the sake of the important theme of “breed” or procreation, the weapon that the young friend can use to fight against the destructive force of the forever on-going time, to squarely face its relentless challenge and to continue his rare qualities. Such interpretations of these poetic forms can be convincingly supported by Begol’s New Formalist argument that “form itself, when interpreted, is an essential source of meaning” (7). One more interesting example of the importance of form is the fact that Sonnet 12 is written in one single sentence that metaphorically suggests that every human being lives only once in life according to the natural law because the Grim Reaper will never give anyone a second chance. Thus the importance of procreation is effectively

emphasized. Hence in the poem, time is the invisible marker of life, measuring any organic and biological existence in its mysterious ways. At the same time, the forever ongoing time also witnesses new generations continually coming: "Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake / And die as fast as they see others grow" (12: 12-3). The paradox of both the juxtaposition of the concrete visible developing demonstration of time and its abstract invisible destructive power are indeed perplexing to the reader. Like Andrew Marvell's speaker in "To His Coy Mistress," who can vividly imagine the devouring Time's "slow-chapped power," Shakespeare's speaker can see and feel time like a monster that sucks or swallows the brave bright day and turns it into the hideous dark night, and he can also fear time's invisible destructive power, taking away the beauty of life, making "the violet past prime," dyeing "the sable's curls" with silvering seasons, making all the lavish leaves of the once "lofty trees" yellow and dry, scything "the summer's green," and bearing away the dead girded sheaves "on the bier with white and bristly beard." Thus even the same word "time" itself starts with the concrete denotation of life's measurement by "the clock that tells the time" of seconds, minutes, hours, days, nights, seasons and years gradually, turns into the abstract connotation of destructive power turning all beautiful things into "wastes," and finally becomes the metaphorical Grim Reaper, the scary image of death itself, who cuts off / down any living things with his looming scythe. The gradual development of the concrete denotation of time from the beginning to the abstract connotation of its wasting process in the middle and to the imaginative symbol of death itself at the end also tightens the syntactical structure of the poem as an organic whole.

The thematic, syntactical and poetic functions of the word "Time" in both Sonnets 12 and 15 are strikingly similar. The concrete denotation of "Time" in Sonnet 15 is implied in "everything that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment" (15:1-2), "men as plants increase" (15:5) and "youthful sap, at height decrease" (15:7), while the abstract connotation of it is metaphorically displayed in line eleven, "Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay," where both the abstract Time and Decay are personified. In a strikingly similar way, "Time" in both Sonnets 12 and 15 is explicitly shown with a macabre power that not only destroys youth, but also wastes beauty and forcibly cuts down life, and finally drives every old thing / person into the dark grave. Thus the progressing development of time structurally unifies the whole poem.

The more obvious examples of the "perplexing juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete" (Hammond 7) in both Sonnets 12 and 15 are perhaps "the brave day sunk in hideous night" (12:2) and "To change your day of youth to sullied

night” (15:13). The concrete words in these lines are the antonyms of “day” and “night,” if we do not mention their symbolic meanings of bright life and dark death. But the adjectives before them are explicitly abstract in both poems. For example, the word “brave” before “day” in Sonnet 12 is not only abstract, but also unfamiliar to modern readers who may be familiar only with its meaning of “showing courage,” but not with the abstract meaning “brilliant and splendid” or “resplendent” as Stephen Booth glosses it (151). As “day” and “night” are antonyms in the poem, logically the abstract adjectives before them should be also antonyms as well. Thus, if we know the positive meaning of “brave” is brilliant and splendid, therefore, pleasant to sight, we can logically surmise that the adjective “hideous” before the word “night” should be negative, dark and exceedingly ugly, therefore, offensive and repulsive to sight. In a strikingly similar manner, the abstract adjective before “night” in Sonnet 15 is the past participle “sullied” used as an adjective which literally means “soiled or tarnished.” So both “hideous” before “night” in Sonnet 12 and “sullied” before “night” in Sonnet 15 are offensive not only to the senses, but also to the imagination. Only by understanding the “perplexing juxtaposition of [these] abstract and the concrete” words, can we clearly see the important themes implied in the antithesis: the impermanence of physical life is forever overpowered by the permanence of the power of devouring Time. In metaphorical terms, the lush physical beauty of the natural world, which is subjected to change and decay, is reflected in human life in general and in the transient perfection of the young friend of the speaker in particular in the poem. The irresistible process of change leading to decay and death is indeed dark, scary and ugly, and it becomes a powerful and convincing reason for the speaker to urge the young friend to do something with his young life instead of wasting it.

Both Sonnets 12 and 15 clearly show that the prime of any physical life inevitably declines and the decline is marked by change that is mechanically measured by the symbolic clock that forever tick-tocks / takes away the seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years of any organic and biological life. Youth and beauty symbolized by the brave bright day are helplessly encroached by scary death embodied in the hideous/sullied night. No matter how brilliant or splendid one’s life is, the beauty of it is merely as transient as any beautiful “violet” that will decline and wither after its spectacular blooming. The momentary “perfection” of any showy young life will fleet as fast as a beautiful comet flies across the sky. Irresistibly “the brave state” of any person will soon vanish, as people “past prime” will grow old like the black sable whose black hair will soon turn to silver gray “o’er with white.” This is exactly the important point that the speaker attempts to convey

to his young friend and tries to make him understand: as the splendid beauty of any young living things will be "sullied" by the invisible hand of nature, his youth and beauty will be naturally cut by "Time's scythe." The only way to preserve them is to get married and beget children who will carry them on from one generation to the next.

The word "brave" also appears in the concluding line of Sonnet 12, but this time it functions as a verb instead of an adjective in line two, "Save breed, to *brave* him when he takes thee hence" [italics added]. The choice of the word is brilliant, and certainly the word is "re-born in the act of [careful] thinking" in Herbert Read's term (qtd. in Hughes 81). It implies that in fighting against the destructive power of Time to preserve youth and beauty, the young friend needs the unyielding courage that the word "brave" normally denotes. More importantly, mere courage is not really enough, so, great endurance, perseverance and persistence are also needed in such an unending fight. The verb "brave" conveys exactly the meaning of endurance and persistence that can stand for and face the ongoing challenge of Time and enable the young friend to pass his beauty and youth onto his offspring not only for now but also for generations to come. As mentioned above, the examples of "juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete," such as "time," "brave," "day" and "night" also appear in Sonnet 15, and they can be conveniently used in the comparative examination of the two sonnets.

As an adjective, "brave" (15:8) also means "excellent" and "splendid." But if "brave" (12:2) lays stress more on the day's splendid brilliance that is pleasant to see, which is sharply contrasted to the hideous night's exceeding ugliness that is repulsive to sight, then, "brave" (15:8) obviously places the stress on the resplendent aspect of the showy performance by youth. It indicates that anything and anyone young and beautiful naturally show off their brilliant youth and beauty because they are performers on the huge stage of the world suggested in Sonnet 15. Thus "brave" as an adjective has basically the same meaning in both poems, but with a slightly different emphasis in each.

One of the reasons that both Sonnet 12 and Sonnet 15 can be interestingly compared is not only because both poems explore strikingly similar themes such as change, impermanence of beauty in both natural life and human life by the destructive force of Time, and the preservation of youth and beauty by propagation, but also because both poems apply similar metaphorical antonyms, such as "day" for bright brilliant life and "night" for dark ugly death, which form contrasting poetic antitheses.

And see the brave *day* sunk in hideous *night*, [italics added] (12: 2)

To change your *day* of youth to sullied *night*, [italics added] (15: 8)

Obviously in both Sonnets 12 and 15, in a strikingly similar metaphorical way, day symbolizes splendid beauty, sweet youth and bright life while night symbolizes ugly darkness and scary death. In their totally opposing way, they form a sharply contrasting antithesis: no matter how brilliant they are, any young life and natural beauty will be inevitably devoured by the monstrous Time. The antithesis also points to the important themes of impermanence versus permanence, mutability versus eternity and mortality versus immortality, which are also important themes of many other sonnets in Shakespeare's entire sonnet sequence, such as Sonnets 18, 19, 55, 60, 63, 65 and 73, to name only a few.

In Sonnet 15, the words "increase" (15:5) and "decrease" (15:7) that form another poetic antithesis also deserves attention, as they imply two important themes in the first part of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence: continuation and termination. Everyone knows that at the beginning of the very first sonnet of the sequence, Shakespeare establishes the theme of propagation with the word "increase" to preserve beauty and youth, so the speaker advises his young friend to marry and beget children in order to continue his youth and beauty; otherwise, they will be soon terminated:

From fairest creatures we desire *increase*, [italics added]

That thereby beauty's rose might never die,

But as the ripper should by time *decease* [italics added]

His tender heir might bear his memory: (1: 1-4)

When I perceive that men as plants *increase*, [italics added]

Cheered and checke'd even by the selfsame sky,

Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height *decrease*, [italics added]

And wear their brave state out of memory; (15: 5-8)

The important themes of Sonnet 1 are very much similar to those of Sonnet 15, and so is the choice of the word "increase" for propagation which is often considered as a unifying theme of the first seventeen sonnets. Except that Sonnet 15 serves as a transition between the two themes of perpetuating the youth and beauty of the young friend first by propagation and then by eternal verse, aslight difference between Sonnet 1 and Sonnet 15 is that the theme of propagation is sharply contrasted with the theme of threatening death in Sonnet 1 while the propagation

theme is urgently contrasted with the inevitable process of growing old in Sonnet 15. Thus the word “decease” in Sonnet 1 becomes “decrease” in Sonnet 15. But the effect of the poetic antitheses is the same in both sonnets.

In what way does Sonnet 15 serve as a transitional bridge connecting the two most important themes of immortalizing the youth and beauty of the young friend first by propagation and then by eternal verse? To answer this question, Hallett Smith's following claim may serve as a hint: “They [some critics] are swayed by the awareness that the offspring theme has already been associated with immortality through verse, particularly in 15 and 17” (11). The key of Smith's claim is the expression “associated with,” which clearly points out that the procreation or offspring theme is either connected to or combined with the theme of permanence through the speaker's immortal verse. This can encourage us to carefully examine the poem to find the password to the puzzling question which hints not only at preservation of youth and beauty through procreation, but also at immortality through verse. I have already mentioned earlier that the word “increase” (15:5) echoes the theme of procreation established in Sonnet 1. Both the first line of Sonnet 1, “From fairest creatures we desire increase” and the fifth line of Sonnet 15, “When I perceive that men as plants increase,” clearly indicate the theme of procreation.

The more obvious indication of the theme of procreation is in the last line, “As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.” The key here is the word ingraft (engraft) which literally means to graft or insert a scion of one tree into a stock of another tree. Then the word “ingraft” (engraft) can metaphorically suggest joining the young fair friend to a lady by marriage that will prolong the family tree with future new branches. In this case, the speaker more or less becomes a symbolic go-between or marriage broker.

Yet in what way/s is / are the procreation theme “associated with immortality through verse”? It is not difficult to accept the tree engrafting as the extended metaphor of marriage that can join the young friend with a lady in order to preserve his beauty and youth with procreation. Symbolically, we can also accept the skill of tree engrafting as the conceit of the craft of writing. But technically the argument seems far-fetched unless the term “ingraft” (engraft) can have something to do with verse writing, and this is exactly where Shakespeare can show to the world his craftsmanship not only of language but also of everlasting poetry. Indeed, “ingraft” (engraft) also carries or denotes the meaning of writing, as the word is rooted in its Greek origin of *graphien* which means “to write” (Keen 249). Stephen Booth's helpful glossarial explanation of Sonnet 15 can help further strengthen the point:

Despite a probable pun on *engraft* ... and its Greek root *graphien*, “to write,” and some likeness between a stylus (*graphis*) and a scion [original italics], a reader presumably does not recognize this first of several traditional claims for the immortalizing power of verse [Here] he can be said to have been doing two things — writing verse and urging the young man to marry. (158)

Booth’s explanation of the “probable pun on *engraft*” not only validates Herbert Read’s statement: “In poetry the words are born or re-born in the act of thinking” (qtd. in Hughes 81) but also further technically proves Hallett Smith’s claim: “the offspring theme has already been associated with immortality through verse.” This is one of the best examples of Shakespeare’s poetic diction that clearly demonstrates his ingenious artistic skills of word choices which can fully prove Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s definition: “poetry = [*sic*] the best words in their best order.” Indeed, as Edward Hubler maintains: “He [Shakespeare] had no need to pad his lines; the talent for the right word was in his flesh like blood” (20). Certainly in these poems, Shakespeare’s words are not only “born or reborn in the act of thinking,” but also artistically important “to connect their signifyingpower with the meanings produced by semantic and thematic elements,” just as Fredric V. Bogol’s new formalist concept proves: “One reason a work’s form cannot finally be separated from its meaning is that form itself, when interpreted, is an essential source of meaning” (Bogol 7).

Unique Syntactical Structures: The Best Formal Orders

“If ‘A poem should not mean/But be,’ then — though only in a highly particular sense — what sort of thing should it be? Many sorts of thing, of course, but to most formalist or neoformalist critics, a poem is first and foremost a linguistic object, a piece of language, a structure whose “material cause,” in Aristotelian terms, is the language in which it is written” (Bogel 29).

Robert Graves once reminded young English poets, “I believe that every English poet should read the English classics, master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them....”⁵ Grave’s statement indicates that any good English poets must master the rules of English grammar, so they will be able to know how to put “the best words in their best order” as Coleridge requires it. The syntactical or grammatical structures of Sonnets 12, 15, and 29 can convincingly prove that Shakespeare is indeed one of the best English poets, who can artistically put “the best words in their best order” to form unique syntactical structures that

can best serve his logical sequence and poetic meanings in the three sonnets. Talking about the syntactical structures of Shakespeare's sonnets, Edward Hubler has this to say: "Perhaps we can learn more of Shakespeare's poetic practice if we turn to a structural pattern with which he always succeeded. No sonnet beginning with "When" is an undistinguished poem" (25). As Sonnets 12, 15, and 29 all start with "When," naturally they are all distinguished poems according to Hubler.

The sequential structures of Shakespeare's Sonnet 12 and Sonnet 15 can be interestingly compared, as they are strikingly similar to each other. First, both poems are logically unified in a similar unique sequence framed neatly within one single sentence. Secondly, both of them begin their sequential order with a similar cause of the ongoing challenging mutability marked by Time which relentlessly ticks(-tocks) / takes away beauty, youth and life with his small second-hand, and thirdly, both poems logically reach the consequential point in the third quatrain that strongly urges the young friend to understand that the beauty and youth of any life will be soon ravished by the Grim Reaper. At the same time, both poems start the third quatrain with the same word "Then" that not only leads to the logical consequential point, but also delivers the natural cause-effect result, and meanwhile it also reveals the speaker's purpose of convincing the young friend of the reality that Time will soon devour his own beauty and youth. Logically, the word "Then" indicates that the main concepts of the third quatrains of both poems derive from the sequential developments of the causes in the first two quatrains, so it also implies that the ideas of the third quatrains are the natural results derived from the first two quatrains. Finally it is also interesting to note that the ending rhyming couplets of both poems start with the same word "And," which neatly connects the ideas of the third quatrains with the important key points of the concluding couplets. If the final couplet of Sonnet 12 strongly urges the young friend to get married and produce children, the ending couplet of Sonnet 15 firmly shows the speaker's determination to immortalize his young friend's beauty and youth by both recommended procreation and eternal verse.

In grammatical terms, the structural patterns of both Sonnet 12 and Sonnet 15 are also strikingly similar. Both poems are written in just one single sentence which is of course a complicated compound and complex sentence. Both poems start the first quatrain with a "When..." adverbial clause of time, and both start the second quatrain with another "When..." adverbial clause of time:

When I do count the clock that tells the time, (12:1)

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves, (12:5)

When I consider everything that grows (15:1)

When I perceive that men as plants increase, (15:5)

Both sonnets begin the third quatrain with the conjunctive adverb "Then."

Then of thy beauty do I question make, (12:9)

Then the conceit of this inconstant stay (15:9)

Except the adverbial clauses of time in the first eight lines, both sonnets have two main clauses, one in the third quatrain and the other in the concluding couplet; both start their first main clause in line eight, and both begin their ending couplets with the same coordinating conjunction "And," which tightly links the first main clause in the third quatrain with the second main clause in the concluding rhyming couplets, just as Edward Hubler points out: "It is simply that "when" introduces a subordinate clause which must, perhaps after more subordinate matter, lead to a main clause, thus creating an arrangement of logically ordered elements in an emphatic sequence" (25).

And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence

Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.(12:13-14)

And all in war with Time for love of you,

As he takes from you, I ingraft you new. (15:13-14)

In terms of the syntactical patterns and the unities of the poems, the conjunctive adverb "When" that starts the adverbial time clauses three times in Sonnet 12, and twice in Sonnet 15, also serves as a coherent and bridging transition that helps interfuse the first parts of the poems to the second parts. In a similar manner, the conjunctive adverb "Then" in line nine that naturally connects the adverbial clauses in the first eight lines and the main clauses in the third quatrain, and the coordinating conjunction "And" in line thirteen that tightly combines the third quatrains with the ending couplets, all also serve as strong transitional words that naturally, logically and effectively unify the poems as outstanding works of art. Indeed, these transitional words are not only "best words in their best order" but also skillfully frame the syntactical and grammatical structures that make the poems into everlasting artistic examples. This is exactly why Edward Hubler argues: "He is almost certain to succeed when the parts of the sonnet stand in a "When I, When I, Then I, So relationship, or in some variant of it" (25).

Like Sonnets 12 and 15, Sonnet 29 is also written in just one single sentence that is also a compound complex sentence whose syntactical structures are even more skillfully interwoven and amazingly intricate. Sonnet 29 also starts with an adverbial “When...” clause of time. But unlike Sonnet 12 which has three “When...” clauses, and unlike Sonnet 15 which has two “When ...” clauses in the first eight lines, Sonnet 29 has just one such adverbial “When...” clause of time in the first eight lines. This adverbial clause is obviously very long and intricately complicated with several prepositional phrases, and present and past participle phrases as modifiers. The following detailed analyses can display how skillfully complex and intricately complicated this long adverbial clause of time can be:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least; (29: 1-8)

The prepositional phrase “in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes” in the first line is separated by two commas: one is before it and the other is after it; therefore, it is independent, yet, it is within the framework of the whole “When...” clause. Such an independent prepositional phrase also appears at the end of the “When...” clause: “With what I most enjoy contented least,” and the complexity of this prepositional phrase is that it contains two verb forms placed together: “enjoy contented.” Obviously “enjoy” is in the simple present tense while “contented” initially seems to be in the past form. But the syntactical context of the whole adverbial “When...” clause requires the simple present tense be used, as the verbs used in line two (beweepe), line three (trouble), line four (look and curse) and line eight (enjoy) are all in the simple present forms. Then “contented” is not really in the past tense; rather, it is a past participle used as an adjective. Thus the line should be read as “With what I most enjoy, [but am] contented least.” Further, this seemingly simple yet indeed complicated prepositional phrase also forms a paradox and antithesis in the poetic context of the poem.

Except the two independent prepositional phrases discussed above, other examples that can show the skillful complexity and intricate complication of

the long adverbial “When...” clause are the verbal phrases including the present participle phrase, “Wishing me like to one more rich in hope” in line five, the past participle phrase “Featured like him, like him with friends possessed” in line six, and another present participle phrase “Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope” in line seven. All these phrases are participle phrases, but the interesting thing to note is that Shakespeare uses a past participle phrase in line six between two present participle phrases in lines five and seven. It is also interesting that line six starts with a past participle, “Featured” and ends also with a past participle, “possessed,” both of which help keep the poetic and syntactical balance of the line. Further, the repetition of the short prepositional phrase, which forms a rhetorical diacope, “like him, like him,” also helps keep the poetic and syntactical balance of the line. But in grammatical terms, why does Shakespeare use a past participle phrase in line six by wrapping it with two present participle phrases in lines five and seven? Clearly if he had used another present participle phrase in line six, it would have been syntactically paralleled with the other two in lines five and seven, and then, a perfect flowing parallelism would naturally suggest a sense of smoothness without any interruption. But it is exactly the interruption that Shakespeare uses to express the confusion, frustration and perplexity of the speaker’s troubled feelings in his unfortunate status “in disgrace.”

Moreover, the unparalleled structure of the line also strengthens the syntactical complexities of the long adverbial “When...” clause. This line cannot be paralleled with line five also because it is a subordinate part of line five in grammatical terms. Grammatically lines five and six should be read like this: “Wishing me like to one more rich in hope [and wishing me to be] featured like him, like him with friends possessed.” Further, the intricate complexity of the long adverbial “When...” clause is also shown in the sequential verbs used after the subject “I” to express the speaker’s miserable situation of ill fortune: “beweep” in line two, “trouble” in line three, “look upon” and “curse” in line four. As these four verbs express a series of actions one right after another, they are tightly bound by the coordinating conjunction “and” three times. It is exactly the skillful and appropriate arrangement of the prepositional phrases, the verbal phrases, the serial action verbs and especially the proper uses of transitional words that make the extremely complex and intricately complicated syntactical structures of this long adverbial “When...” clause appear natural without artificial awkwardness that causes any doubt of clumsy arbitrary manipulations. This is indeed a good example to prove Shakespeare’s poetic skills. In short, the intricate complexity of the long adverbial “When...” clause obviously suggests the complicated feelings, prolonged anxiety,

perplexing confusion and bitter frustration of the speaker in his unfortunate circumstances.

Unlike Sonnets 12 and 15 which have two main clauses in the last six lines, one in the third quatrain and the other in the concluding couplet, Sonnet 29 has three main clauses, two in the third quatrain and one in the ending couplet. The two main clauses in the third quatrain consist of a compound structure joined by the coordinating conjunctive phrase “and then”:

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, *and then* my state, [italics added]
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; (29: 9-12)

Compared to the long and complicated adverbial “When...” clause in the first eight lines, the syntactical structure of the third quatrain is relatively simple and clear, except the prepositional phrases “in these thoughts myself almost despising” (29: 9) and “Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth” (29:11-12). In other words, if we take all the prepositional phrases away, the two main clauses are simply quite easy to recognize: “Haply I think on thee, and then my state...sings hymns at heaven's gate.”

But the two prepositional phrases in the third quatrain can still cause confusion and misunderstanding for the reader, especially the first so-called prepositional phrase: “in these thoughts myself almost despising.” No doubt, “in these thoughts” is a prepositional phrase, but what is the grammatical function of “myself almost despising”? When we ask this question, we will find that in a grammatical sense, this line as a whole cannot be considered as a prepositional phrase; rather it should be a present participle phrase in inverted order that can be called a rhetorical anastrophe. The normal order of the line should be read like this: almost despising myself in these thoughts. The intentional inversion of the normal word order in this line results in the skillful anastrophe that artistically reflects the complicity and intricacy of the long adverbial “When...” clause in the first eight lines. Hence, this line also becomes a transition that helps form the sharp contrast between the first eight lines and the last six lines.

The other prepositional phrase that also needs discussing is “Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth” (29: 10-11), as it has caused much discussion because of its controversial punctuation. In the 1609 Quarto version,⁷ the phrase is punctuated with parentheses:

Haplye I thinke on thee, and then my fstate,
 (Like to the Larke at breake of daye arifing)
 From fullen earth fings himns at Heauens gate,

In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 1, it is also punctuated with parentheses but with the ending parenthesis or bracket in a different place:

Haply I think on thee, and then my state
 (Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate; (29: 10-12)

But in the Oxford compact edition, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, the parentheses are replaced with commas:

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate; (29: 10-12)

Naturally it is the lark that rises "From sullen earth," so the phrase "From sullen earth" should be included into the preceding line without any punctuation in between: "Like to the lark at break of day arising/From sullen earth." This proves that the 1609 parenthetical punctuation was not proper because it may cause misunderstanding and confusion. No wonder both the Oxford version and the Norton version of the sonnet have changed it, and Stephen Booth has also rightly pointed out:

That punctuation can mislead a modern reader into assuming that he should understand *lark* as the only riser, *state* as the only singer, and *From sullen earth* as designating only the place from which *state sings*[....] Both the Q [1609 quarto version] punctuation and the line-end pause between *arising* and *From* carry a syntactically blurred image of the speaker's state) sending hymns aloft from earth, sending hymns up to heaven [original italics]. (181)

Logically it is easy to accept that the subject of "sings" should be the lark as the lark is a singing bird. Nevertheless in grammatical terms, with either the comma punctuation or the parenthetical punctuation, both the Oxford version and the

Norton version of Sonnet 29 clearly show that the technical grammatical subject is the “state” which is personified, so the speaker’s mental “state” is metaphorically elevated to the spiritual “heaven” when he recalls the love of his young friend. Indeed, in syntactical terms, the singing lark is compared with the state of the speaker by a simile: “Like to the lark.” Any modern reader with some basic grammatical knowledge can understand that the lark should not be treated as being completely separated from the state of the speaker; therefore, they will not mistakenly take the “*lark* as the only riser, *state* as the only singer,” as Booth’s puts it:

Actually, the general context (downcast spirits and low status), on the one hand, and both common knowledge of birds and the inevitable unity of the standard phrase “arising from,” on the other, make any punctuation powerless to deny that state and lark are both singers and risers. (181)

As mentioned in the above discussion, the word “state” in line ten is the subject of the second main clause: “Haply I think on thee, and then my *state*...sings hymns at heaven’s gate” [italics added]. Clearly it is a key word in the poem, as it also appears in line two: “I all alone bewEEP my outcast *state*” [italics added], as well as in line fourteen: “That then I scorn to change my *state* with kings” [italics added]. The “outcast state” of the speaker at the beginning is sharply contrasted to the heavenly “state” that “sings hymns at heaven’s gate” in the third quatrain, as “state” in line two suggests the speaker’s social ostracism and personal miserable situation when he is out of the favor of the wheel of fortune, but “state” in line ten clearly shows the speaker’s elevated spiritual status that makes him feel like he is in paradise when he thinks of the love of his beloved young friend while the “state” in the last line of the sonnet expresses a hyperbolic comparison between his heavenly status and the royal, glorious, noble and dignified status of kings. The “state” in line two implies a comparison between the speaker and common men while the “state” in line fourteen shows a comparison between the speaker’s elevated spirit and noble and royal status of kings. The “state” in line ten is explicitly superior to the “state” of kings in line fourteen because the speaker does not want to exchange it with that of kings. Thus the thrice-used same word “state” stands for three contrasting and comparing situations that help unite the whole sonnet as an organic whole. Further, like the word “time” in Sonnets 12 and 15 that develops from the concrete denotative meaning of seconds, minutes and hours to the abstract connotative meaning of waste, destruction, and death, the word “state” in Sonnet 29 also starts

from the concrete and move to the abstract, from the external social “outcaste state” in disgrace to the internal spiritual “state” of heaven, which is hyperbolically compared to the royal status of kings. The transforming development of the word “state” in Sonnet 29 is another good example to display Hammond’s “juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete.”

Shakespeare’s deliberate emphasis of the word “state” is also shown in his rhyming pattern of the sonnet, as he uses it as a rhyming word in both lines two and ten:

I all alone beweep my outcast state, (line 2)

Haply I think on thee, and then my state, (line 10)

And so the rhyming pattern of Sonnet 29 becomes a b a b c d c d e b e b f f; in other words, the b-rhyme in the first quatrain is duplicated in the third quatrain. Quite obviously this rhyming pattern is a very rare exception among all Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets. In fact, for the 154 sonnets of his entire sonnet sequence, Shakespeare uses a standard rhyming pattern of abab cdcd efef gg almost all the time, except Sonnets 3, 99, 126⁸ and this one — Sonnet 29. That is exactly why the rhyming pattern of abab cdcd efef gg has become a standard Shakespearean pattern.⁹ But, Shakespeare purposely deviates from his own favored standard rhyming pattern by repeating the b-rhymes in the third quatrain of Sonnet 29 which, according to Murdo William McRae, “is Shakespeare’s [only] one sonnet to duplicate the b-rhymes without having to rely on a suffix for the effect” (7). By doing so, Shakespeare uniquely and effectively emphasizes the word “state” whose repetition in the rhyming pattern of the poem certainly adds more significance to the contrasting meanings of the word, to the poetic effect, and to the structural coherence and unity of the poem. Indeed the b-rhyme in the first quatrain and its duplication in the third quatrain coherently “pull the poem together” (McRae 7). But the whole picture of the comparing and contrasting qualities of “out-cast state” in the first quatrain and the heavenly “state” in the third quatrain are not completed, and the perfect poetic effect and the artistic unity are not accomplished until they are once again echoed and reflected by the “state of kings” in the last line of the poem.

The poetic unity and coherence of Sonnet 29 are further established with effective transitional words and expressions. The coordinating conjunction “Yet” in line nine, which also serves as an effective transitional word, helps form the sharp contrast between the first two quatrains and the third quatrain of the sonnet. I agree with McRae’s point that compared to the logical when/then syntax in Sonnets

12, 15 and 30, "the abrupt displacement of the structure of consequence with the structure of contrast adds to the poem's energy" (7), but I disagree that the when/yet structure of contrast is a breakdown of the logical when/then structure, "giving it the overall effect of pulling apart" (McRae 7). Rather, I would argue that the coordinating conjunction "Yet" in line nine, like a volta in an Italian sonnet to join the octave with the sestet, logically leads to a sharp contrast between the first part and the last part of the poem, giving it the overall effect of joining both.

The coordinating conjunction "For" (15:13), which means "on this ground," is also a brilliant transition that bridges the first two main clauses in the third quatrain with the third main clause in the concluding couplet. If the reader can recognize the adverbial clause of result introduced by the transitional "such ... that" structure and the use of rhetorical anastrophe for the purpose of rhyming "brings" with "kings," the syntactical structure of the concluding couplet is relatively simple and clear. It is crucial to understand the transitional "such ... that" structure in normal order because that structure in normal order excludes the possibility of misreading the word "then" as a conjunctive adverb in the last line, as "then" is just an simple adverb without any conjunctive function in the line. Thus the normal order of the last two lines should be read as: "For [on this ground] thy sweet love remembered brings such wealth that I scorn to change my state with kings then [as a necessary consequence]."

Compared to the long and complicated "When" clause in the first eight lines, the short and relatively clear structure of the third main clause in the concluding couplet matches the elevated and happy feelings and the high spirit of the speaker, like a happy singing lark soaring into the sky when he thinks of his beloved young friend.

Compared to Sonnets 12 and 15, Sonnet 29's major syntactical difference is that Sonnet 29 starts the third quatrain with the coordinate conjunction "Yet" while both Sonnets 12 and 15 begin the third quatrain with the conjunctive adverb "Then." This is simply because the third quatrains of both Sonnets 12 and 15 are the consequences naturally derived from the first two quatrains, while the third quatrain of Sonnet 29 is a sharp contrast to the first two quatrains. In other words, the developing patterns of both Sonnets 12 and 15 are sequential while the structural pattern of Sonnet 29 is one of contrast. In Sonnet 12, the speaker's main concern is to give his young friend urgent advice to preserve youth and beauty by procreation while in Sonnet 15, the speaker is more determined to either help his young friend to get married and beget children to carry on his youth and beauty, or immortalize them with everlasting verse, but in Sonnet 29, the speaker highly dramatizes the

love of his beloved young friend by sharply contrasting two polarized extremes—his “outcast state” and his heavenly “state” which he even does not want to exchange with the royal “state” of any kings. All the words and expressions that also distinctively function as transitions discussed above are important because they are crucial not only in forming the syntactical structures and grammatical patterns but also in signifying the significant meanings of the poems. They can be best depicted with a significant concept of New Formalism: “The link between form and meaning, however formulated or understood, is essential to formalist undertakings” (Bogel 8).

Conclusion

“For close reading can function as a powerful and integral part of any sort of critical analysis” (Bogel 33).

In my study of Shakespeare’s three sonnets, I have paid “scrupulous attention to” poetic forms, to borrow Bogel’s term (7), namely the poetic forms such as diction, syntactic pattern, grammatical structure and figurative language because “[the] life of forms is simply the innumerable ways in which the artwork comes to life through interpretation” (Leighton 18). Mine is also a close reading of the three sonnets, focusing on Shakespeare’s artistic use of language because “[whatever] else the literary text may be, language is what it always is (Bogel 25), also because “[the] authority of language can only be tested by close reading and resides in language itself as used and used again” (Hartman 173). My close reading obviously reveals how Shakespeare is indeed one of the best English poets even without mentioning his unparalleled achievement in drama. The artistically constructed poetic forms of the poems can strongly prove it. It is a pleasure for readers to read and appreciate them if they try to engage themselves in finding the secret paths, decoding the hidden meanings of forms to get into the artistic compartments of their poetic labyrinths. Their complicated poetic diction, complex syntactic structures and multiple layers of meanings often challenge professional experts. No wonder Harold Bloom admiringly praises Shakespeare’s sonnets highly:

As a rough series of isolated splendors, the best among them are rightly judged to be the most eminent in the language, superior to Spenser, Sidney, and Drayton, but also to Milton, Wordsworth, and Keats. They have a monumental quality difficult to match in any Western language, worthy of the poet of “The Phoenix and the Turtle.” (1)

I also agree with Gerald Hammond's point:

My belief ... is that the great number of non-expert readers, so long as they are careful and engaged readers, may find a way of reading a reflective lyric which is as subtle and coherent as that of a scholar of Renaissance ideas, without their having to relate the poem to the entire culture within which it was written. (7)

The scrupulous analyses of the poetic forms of Sonnets 12, 15 and 29 above should be helpful for both "the great number of [engaged] non-expert readers" to read Shakespeare's sonnets and the professionals to teach or do further research on them. The primary skill to approach a Shakespearean sonnet is to focus on its poetic forms and syntactical structures, which can lead the careful readers and engaged scholars to the important meanings of the poem, upon which they can dig into different channels leading to the treasures hidden in the complex labyrinth of Shakespeare's poetry.

Notes

1. According to Yvor Winters, Sonnet 66 is also written in a single sentence, See his "Poetic Style in Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Discussions of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Ed. Barbara Herrnstein (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1964) 108. Yet according to the Oxford compact edition, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, that sonnet consists of two sentences with the first 12 lines as the first sentence and the concluding couplet as the second one (Wells and Taylor 759). In the 1609 quarto edition, both Sonnets 7 and 11 are also a single sentence, but according to the Oxford compact edition, Sonnet 7 has three sentences while Sonnet 11 has six sentences (Wells and Taylor 751, 752).
2. Sir Herbert Read (1893–1968) is quoted by Glenn Hughes in *Imagism & the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1960) 81.
3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talks of S. T. Coleridge* (July 12, 1827), ed. Henry N. Coleridge, Dec. 10, 2016 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/8489/pg8489.html>>.
4. The version of Sonnet 12 in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed. vol. 1 (1172) is the only one with a caesura comma after "Save breed." Both versions of the poem in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* edited and glossed by Stephen Booth (12, 15) and the Oxford compact edition, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (752) do not have the caesura. I agree with the Norton version because the spondee, "Save breed," is a striking stress itself, and the caesura marks a further emphasis on the spondee. Unless

otherwise stated, all the quotations of Sonnets 12, 15 and 29 are from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed. vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

5. The quotation is from one of the three lectures by Robert Grave at Oxford University, and it was quoted at the beginning of the People section of *Time* magazine (15 December 1961) 36.

6. Diacope (Greek): “to cut in two, cut through” — a rhetorical term showing repetition of a word with one or more between, usually to express deep feelings.

7. For the original version of the poem, see Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977) 26, 29.

8. In Sonnet 3, the e rhyme in the third quatrain is repeated in the ending couplet. As Sonnet 99 has fifteen lines, the a rhyme is repeated three times in the first five lines—a b a b a, while Sonnet 126 has only twelve pentameter lines that form six rhyming couplets. Sonnet 145 is written in tetrameter, rhyming a a b b c d c d e f e f g g. See also Edward Hubler, *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: Princeton UP, 1952) 17-8.

9. In fact, Shakespeare is not the first English poet who coined this rhyming pattern and should not take the credit for its coinage; however, as he was and perhaps still is one of the best English poets (if not the best), people have not only accredited it to his reputation but also made it the standard structural and rhyming pattern of the English sonnet, just as the Petrarchan sonnet is equal to Italian sonnet, although the form of Italian sonnet was not originally created by Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374). The Shakespearean or English sonnet rhyming pattern abab cdcd efef gg was first created by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). See also Stephen Greenblatt, et al. eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed. vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) 607.

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